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SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PGOV NI

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: PRESIDENTIAL ADVISOR SIGNALS THAT OBASANJO WILL RUN IN 2003

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter. Reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

**¶11.** (U) President Obasanjo's Senate Liaison Officer Kashim Imam told reporters March 5 at the National Assembly that President Obasanjo will run in 2003 because "there is no credible alternative to him." Imam added, "not only will he run on the strength of our achievements, but also he will be reelected because he has performed."

**¶12.** (C) According to PDP National Youth Director Ibrahim Sidi Bamailli, Imam made his statement after the Presidential Villa learned of a move led by House Speaker Na 'Abba for several Representatives to send a joint missive to the PDP leadership opposing Obasanjo as the party's Presidential candidate in 2003. By making this pronouncement, they hoped to place Obasanjo on the defensive, Bamailli maintained. If he announced his candidacy after their action, he would be viewed as the one splitting the party, the Na'Abba group felt. However, because many in this rival group were abroad for the Hajj, the decision to send the statement was never finalized. The Presidency decided that Imam should preempt the mavericks by making a pro-Obasanjo statement before they could re-assemble.

**¶13.** (C) During a March 5 breakfast meeting, Lino Adesanya, a Lagos-based businessman with close contacts in the PDP, confirmed to Ambassador Jeter that party rebels have been seriously caucusing about making a public statement opposing Obasanjo before he formally announces his reelection decision.

**¶14.** (C) Comment : Imam's statement may be part reiteration, part preemptive strike. Presidential advisors periodically make statements that Obasanjo will run again, preserving their boss's flexibility on the question. Works Minister Anenih's "there is no vacancy in the Villa" remark last year was the most famous and set the tone. While Obasanjo may still be mulling over his choices, some advisors publicly have lent their voices to the reelection option in hopes of influencing Obasanjo and to remind the public that Obasanjo has not decided against running.

**¶15.** (C) Comment: The timing of Imam's statement also may have been influenced by news of the rebel group's intentions. Obasanjo's people understand that the player who punches last usually gets called for the foul. They may have felt it important to strike first so that Na'Abba and company will be perceived as undermining party unity should they make an anti-Obasanjo statement close on the heels of Imam's positive one. The choice of Imam, son of a major political figure in Nigerian political history, was likely intended to stem growing Northern opposition to a second Obasanjo term. In that regard, it will have little effect. While Imam's statement may have prevented the Na' Abba group's flanking action this time, the battle has just started. Other skirmishes between Obasanjo friends and foes are certain. End Comment.  
Jeter